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ABSTRACT

The homogeneity of the Japanese people is a major component in their educational achievements. The success of the educational system is linked to various factors, such as the state of the national health, the excellence of the transportation system, a common language, and other cultural attitudes and values. Parents are considered responsible for their children's school work, and children attend school for longer hours and spend more hours studying than do U.S. children. Group goals take precedence over individual goals. Entrance to preferred schools is heavily competitive, as is entrance to higher educational institutions. Topography is a factor, because the Japanese population is concentrated in the coastal areas and in large cities. There is a 98 percent literacy rate. Education has been the instrument of change in Japan, accomplishing national goals and attaining an effective world image. (NL)

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A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY OF JAPANESE EDUCATION

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An understanding of Japanese education is derived from a comprehension of the homogeneity of Japanese culture, a knowledge of the topography of the island nation, and a perception of the feeling of inferiority of the Japanese toward themselves and their feeling of superiority to others.

Japanese Culture

That the island nation of nearly 120 million people is essentially one culture is indicated by the similarity in physical characteristics, the presence of a pervasive though varied artistic expression, and the use of one language.

The Japanese are a product of several strains of people ranging from the darker-skinned inhabitants of the south, Chinese and Koreans, to the lighter-skinned-residents of the north, the Ainus who lived on the northernmost island, Hokkaido. Shards, utensils, and tools that are in a museum in Aomori indicate an indigenous and separate culture that existed until the migrations of the modern-day Japanese superceded them in numbers and in technological attainments. Only a few Ainus exist today in a land almost completely dominated by those known as Japanese. About 500,000 Koreans also live in this nation, as do 50,000 or so other foreigners, most of whom are connected with economic or governmental agencies, businesses, or mission groups.

For centuries, the Japanese were largely similar in height and weight, men being taller by 2 to 3 inches than women, on the average. As late as 1963 it was rare to see a Japanese over 5'7", but in 1987 it is common to see persons of varying heights. The young people have profited from the increase in caloric intake; the absence of previously prevalent diseases, such as tuberculosis; and the presence of more sanitary conditions involving housing, waste disposal, and food preparation. Weight per inch has remained stable because proper diet has kept the Japanese slim while providing nutrients that

make disease resistance highly effective, thus making both Japanese women and men among the longest lived in the world, 80.4 and 76.4 years of age, respectively.

The artistic expression of Japan is an array of colors and kinds, ranging from the creation of delicate hakata clay dolls to group singing by amateurs. Every area has its particular product, the most common one being the doll, carved, painted, of wood or clay; or it has its laquerware, or silver or gold products, or ceramics or pottery, or its wood-block prints, wood carvings, and calligraphy. Paper, plastic, paints, metals, woods, and soils are used to produce all manner of artistic products designed to capture the spirit of both old and modern Japan.

Numerous artists are designated as national treasures by the central government. Included are the outstanding dramatic artists of the stage; namely, kabuki and noh play actors, and bunraku performers. Famous for their period costumes and faithfulness to customs and manners, the dramatic groups preserve the art and artifacts of the past and reeducate the present generations about the ancient art forms that have been prevalent in Japanese culture. Other treasures are potters, painters, and composers.

The language of Japan is the unifying feature of the culture consisting of characters that are either rounded (hiragana) or are square (katakana). Contemporary Japanese is written in a combination of kana (a syllabary) and kanji (Chinese characters). Foreign words are also included in the language and are indicated by less elaborate forms. Despite the influence of the written language, oral dialects exist that inhibit understanding by conversants; that is, residents of Tokyo have difficulty in understanding persons from either Aomori or Hirosaki in northern Honshu. However, they have little difficulty understanding residents of Hokkaido (further north than

Aomori) because many Hakkaido residents were immigrants from southern areas, such as Tokyo, that had crowded living conditions.

At one time, students had to learn 20,000 characters in order to be literate, a character being a depiction of a sound. Today, the number is 2,000 characters. This has been made possible through the extensive publication of newspapers and magazines of all sorts, a main type being the comic book. About 98% of the population is literate, that is, can read and write, and the schools have been the chief vehicle, though not the only one, for this accomplishment.

Japanese children must attend school for at least nine years, and the government pays most of the costs of this education. More students attend private schools than attend public schools for the kindergarten experience, but more attend public schools for the elementary grades than attend private schools. After six years of elementary school and three years of junior high school, children may attend senior high schools for three years, but to enter this level they must pass an entrance examination in several subjects, including English. More students go to private high schools than go to public high schools because there is a limited number of spaces in the public schools.

Japanese children are under intense pressure to succeed in their studies, even to attending only certain schools as early as kindergarten in order to assure entrance into a series of other schools, graduation from which often guarantees positions in prestigious companies. There is a claim by some that admission into a college or university is equivalent to graduation because of the intensity of the testing procedure, which is administered throughout the nation by the separate institutions. Though attendance at specific schools is not tantamount to admission to specific universities, there are clear patterns of attendance-admission processes. In an interview with the president of the Bank of Japan, this author was told that all of the highest ranking executives

of the bank had gone to the same schools, from kindergarten through the university, but that this was not a requirement. He himself, a product of this process, stated that he did not prefer this procedure, but that his brother did, who was president of a Japanese bank in San Francisco.

This practice puts pressure on both children and parents, who see education as a means of upward mobility for their children. For that reason children go to school five-and-one-half days a week for a longer time daily than do American children, and they often go to after-school school to catch up with their peers or maintain the level of achievement expected of them. The mother is the key to the attainment of each child, being held responsible for a daily check on each child's progress, and aiding with homework and relationships with schools. Children respond by being earnest students who are devoted to their studies, intent to achieve the goals of their families, the culture, and the nation. They respond positively to the pressures, being conscious of the group psychology that calls for the achievement of larger goals than those of their own. In becoming a part of the whole they are protected in their environment so that they can achieve and thereby be approved by both peers and elders.

An extreme result is the committing of suicide by some of those students who do not achieve entrance into universities of their choice and who, thereby, will not reach the goals they set for themselves, such as the presidency of a company or a social position they desired, or an ambassadorship in the foreign service. Self-destruction is attempted and sometimes achieved most often after failure to pass entrance examinations, which are often taken after extensive post-high school educational experiences. Less frequent would be a suicide by a student in high school or in grades lower than high school.

Are the Japanese content with their school system? They are, but there

are exceptions to the success syndrome process. Educators complain that standards are being relaxed, especially in light of the influence of television, the viewing of which has increased for students, which lowers the number of hours devoted to study and homework. One professor, shortly after retiring, stated that the standards of learning had declined, that the house of learning was falling in, and that he had been holding up one of the poles but had not done that job well. For his inability to improve the standards and for his inattention to the preserving of the standards, he begged forgiveness.

When identifying problems relating to schooling, Japanese are most often talking about a miniscule change in the status quo. For example, when saying that school vandalism is rampant, they are citing that the numerical increase in this type of act is from a very small number to a small number, perhaps a large percentage increase but certainly not equated with extensive incidences. Their determination is to maintain the morality, educational levels, and civility that have brought them from being a defeated military power, an almost completely economically devasted nation, to its present state of world prominence in the creation, production, and distribution of manufactured products bought by nations of the world, and world leadership in banking.

Topography of the Nation

Why is topography influential in Japanese education? Because 96% of the land is mountainous, the nation's population is concentrated in large cities such as Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, Nagoya, Fukuoka, and Sendai, which are situated in the coastal areas. Through the use of subways and trains, students of all ages are enabled to attend schools of their choosing (if they choose private schools), participate in educationally enriching experiences apart from schools, and be transported (often by bus) to cultural sights, both natural and man-made.

Japanese children ride subways and trains singly or in small groups to attend schools in the larger population areas. Their uniforms identify them as of school age and deny them entrance to places only adults are allowed. They also give them protection. These children are ubiquitous, carrying their school packs, musical instruments, and umbrellas to and from schools dutifully, encouraged to be scholars by parents and prospective employers, and a government determined to use their knowledge and ingenuity to advance its place among the industrialized nations.

There are, in addition to the K-12 schools, hundreds of colleges and universities packed into these heavily populated areas. It is not uncommon for students to crisscross the nation to attend the institutions of higher education that accept them. All of Japan constitutes the pool of students for some universities, but others are more regional in impact, especially the newer ones. Recently formed universities (as recent as 20 years ago) do not have the prestige that the older universities have, so it is more difficult for them to recruit the better students.

Of the nearly 500 junior colleges, about 90% are private and are for women only. They emphasize the domestic and culinary arts related to homemaking. However, many of the skills taught therein can also be learned in schooling that is outside the college; that is, conducted in entrepreneurial institutions that teach origami, ikebana, and the tea ceremony. It seems that education in these arts is pervasive and, therefore, essential to good breeding. Parents send their children to the most prestigious of these rather than having them attend those in their locale. Again, mass transportation--airlines, trains and subways--necessary for moving large numbers of persons enables both outmigration and inmigration of students to take place. Rapid transport also enables city children to attend rural schools as part of the enculturation

experiences desired by the mombusho, the central government's bureau for overseeing Japanese educational processes.

Psychological Considerations

How does the dichotomy of inferiority-superiority affect Japanese education? According to Edward Beauchamp (1) of the University of Hawaii, Japanese education has received good press in the United States, but it is more complex than it would seem to be. He said that one dark side is illustrated by Prime Minister Nakasone's statement that blacks and Hispanics are keeping American educational achievement lower than it should be. This comment displays two Japanese attitudes: the one related to the outside world; the other related to the real world, which is Japanese racial superiority. Nakasone's statement was not reported by the members of the press who heard his remark but by the Japanese Communist party press, which spread it around the world.

Coupled with racism is a movement to the right politically and a renewed emphasis on nationalism. At least part of the educational movement is to a conservative stance. The national teachers' union is a less powerful force than it once was: only 30.9% of new teachers joined a union last year. Further, there are charges that leftists wrote current texbooks and that they should be rewritten. China recently protested that newer textbooks ignored aspects of the Sino-Japanese conflict that it thought Japanese children should know.

Beauchamp stated that schooling is not necessarily the vehicle it once was; therefore, reasons for going to schools today are not the same as they once were, but that they are more realistic. School becomes more valuable to students having inner motivations to succeed rather than to those who prefer to adopt superficially Western ways, for example. Exceptions are the wealthy who

want flexibility in the system, freedom within structuralization. Education may mean freedom for them, but it is not so that education meets the needs of the less well to do.

Victor Kobayashi (2), also of the University of Hawaii, stated that there is not room in colleges and universities for social mobility and that the opportunity for prestigious jobs is diminishing. Children of the more well off will get jobs, but a caste structure is developing, college entry levels have peaked, and, therefore, there is a credentialling of vocational and skill programs in schools possessing high tech equipment. The new emphasis on skills produces persons who are opting for specific jobs, regardless of the prestige of the company. Companies will not be able to choose personnel to train them in what they wish them to do but will have to deal with skilled, professionally trained interviewees seeking positions that utilize skills already achieved.

Many cultural idiosyncrasies observed by visitors in Japan that became stereotypic are becoming minimized, if not eliminated as more is known about Japanese behavior. Japanese are high achievers in many phases of business and industry but try to mask their achievements behind traditional behavior. But information about their psychological development being aggregated by researchers infers that they can no longer hide behind the mask: the inferiority stereotype is no longer credible in light of their accomplishments.

The demonstration of the Japanese national identity to the world, beginning about 1959 and continuing to the present, is a picture of a healthy group of persons who are highly literate, who are involved in commerce around the globe, and who produce all kinds of goods that are of excellent quality. Education has been the vehicle for this change in the perceptions of both the friends and enemies of this island nation.

Conclusion

Education is pervasive, essential, and crucial, for the changing of the image of the nation that was militaristic only five decades ago. The return to a satisfying moral tone that centers on personal responsibility and a workable ethic that concentrates on peaceful relationships with other persons and nations have been the reciprocals to aggressive behavior. Present-day education strives to inculcate in its citizens a sense of destiny, of world involvement in business, and a picture of serenity. It succeeds effectively.

References

1. Edward R. Beauchamp, "Japan and the United States: Education in Comparative Perspective," Symposium, American Educational Studies Association, Pittsburg, November 1, 1986.
2. Victor Kobayashi, ibid.